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Gramsci and hegemony



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By Trent Brown

Antonio Gramsci is an important figure in the history of Marxist theory. While Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels provided a rigorous analysis of capital at the social and economic levels – particularly showing how capital antagonises the working class and gives rise to crisis – Gramsci supplemented this with a sophisticated theory of the political realm and how it is organically/dialectically related to social and economic conditions. He provides us with a theory of how the proletariat must organise politically if it is to effectively respond to capital's crises and failures, and bring about revolutionary change.

Incidentally, this innovation has proven to be of interest not only to Marxists, but also to those involved in other forms of progressive politics, from the civil rights movement, to gender politics, to contemporary ecological struggles. The reason why his approach has proven so popular and generally adaptable is because Gramsci was himself a man of action and his fundamental concern was with progressive strategy. Thus while in this article I plan to give a general outline of Gramsci's theory of hegemony and the reasons behind its formulation, it's important that we build on this by thinking about how we can use these concepts strategically in our own struggles.

What is hegemony?

It would seem appropriate to begin this discussion by asking "What is hegemony?" It turns out to be a difficult question to answer when we are talking about Gramsci,

because, at least within *The Prison Notebooks*, he never gives a precise definition of the term. This is probably the main reason why there is so much inconsistency in the literature on hegemony – people tend to form their own definition, based on their own reading of Gramsci and other sources. The problem with this is that if people's reading of Gramsci is partial then so too is their definition.

For example, Martin Clark (1977, p. 2) has defined hegemony as “how the ruling classes control the media and education”. While this definition is probably more narrow than usual, it does reflect a common misreading of the concept, namely that hegemony is the way the ruling class controls the institutions that control or influence our thought. Most of the academic and activist literature on hegemony, however, takes a slightly broader view than this, acknowledging more institutions than these being involved in the exercise of hegemony – at least including also the military and the political system. The problem is that even when these institutions are taken into account, the focus tends to be exclusively on the ruling class, and methods of control. Hegemony is frequently used to describe the way the capitalist classes infiltrate people's minds and exert their domination. What this definition misses is the fact that Gramsci not only used the term “hegemony” to describe the activities of the ruling class, he also used it to describe the influence exerted by progressive forces. Keeping this in mind, we can see that hegemony should be defined not only as something the ruling class does, it is in fact the process by which social groups – be they progressive, regressive, reformist, etc. – come to gain the power to lead, how they expand their power and maintain it.

To understand what Gramsci was trying to achieve through developing his theory of hegemony, it is useful to look at the historical context that he was responding to as well as the debates in the movement at the time. The term “hegemony” had been in general use in socialist circles since the early 20th century. Its use suggests that if a group was described as “hegemonic” then it occupied a leadership position within a particular political sphere (Boothman, 2008).

Lenin's use of the term *gegemoniya* (the Russian equivalent of hegemony, often translated as “vanguard”), however, seemed to imply a process more akin to what Gramsci would describe. During his attempts to catalyse the Russian Revolution Lenin (1902/1963) made the observation that when left to their own devices, workers tended to reach only a trade union consciousness, fighting for better conditions within the existing system. To bring about revolutionary change, he argued that the Bolsheviks needed to come to occupy a hegemonic position within the struggle against the tsarist regime. This meant not only empowering the various unions by bringing them together, but also involving all of society's “opposition strata” in the movement, drawing out the connections between all forms of “political oppression and autocratic arbitrariness” (Lenin, 1963, pp. 86-87).

In the post-revolutionary period, however, the implication changed. Lenin argued that it was crucial to the establishment of the “hegemony of the proletariat” that (a) the urban proletariat retain an ongoing alliance with the rural peasants (who made up the majority of Russia’s population) in order to retain national leadership and (b) that the expertise of the former capitalists be utilised, by forcing them to effectively manage state industries. These dual processes of leadership via consent and the command of force in the development of hegemony would play a crucial role in Gramsci’s theory. Gramsci had been in Russia from 1922-23 while these debates were raging and it was after this time that we see hegemony begin to take a central role in his writings.

Italy

As much as he was influenced by what was going on in Russia, Gramsci was also influenced by his own political experiences. Gramsci had been heavily involved in the struggle against capitalism and fascism in Italy and for a while served as the leader of the Communist Party of Italy. In the period following the World War I, there had been a lot of optimism in Europe, and Italy in particular, that now that people had seen the atrocities that the ruling classes could unleash and the alternative that was developing in Russia, some kind of workers’ revolution in Europe was imminent.

Gramsci certainly shared this optimism. Events that took place in the early 1920s seemed to confirm this. Tensions at all strata of society were high, there were mass agitations and people were forming factory councils and workers co-operatives. But despite the intensity of the mobilisations, it fizzled out remarkably quickly. Unions were co-opted, workers’ co-ops became marginal and uncompetitive. Common people were intimidated by elites or otherwise captivated by the allure of fascist rhetoric.

Gramsci and others formed the Italian Communist Party to try to reinvigorate the movement, but it was evident that people were too disillusioned by the failures of the previous years to really become involved. Votes for the Communist Party were disappointingly low. When Gramsci was arrested in 1926 as a part of Mussolini’s emergency measures, he found himself in prison with a lot of time to reflect on what had happened and where things went wrong. How was it that the ruling class had been able to so effectively stifle the potential of the movement, and what would be required for the progressive forces to mobilise the masses in a way that would enable them to bring about a fundamental change in society? These questions would of course be central to Gramsci’s theory of hegemony.

Stages

As suggested above, in *The Prison Notebooks* Gramsci refers to hegemony to describe activities of both currently dominant groups as well as the progressive forces. For Gramsci, whatever the social group is, we can see that there are certain common stages of development that they must go through before they can become hegemonic. Drawing on Marx, the first requirement is economic: that the material forces be sufficiently developed that people are capable of solving the most pressing social problems. Gramsci then goes on to state that there are three levels of political development that a social group must pass through in order to develop the movement that will allow change to be initiated.

The first of these stages is referred to as “economic-corporate”. The corporatist is what we might understand as the self-interested individual. People become affiliated at the economic-corporate stage as a function of this self-interest, recognising that they need the support of others to retain their own security. Trade unionism is probably the clearest example of this, at least in the case of people joining a union for fear of pay cuts, retrenchment etc. One can also speak of short-term co-operation between otherwise competing capitalists in these terms. The point to emphasise is that at this stage of a group’s historical development there is no real sense of solidarity between members.

In the second stage, group members become aware that there is a wider field of interests and that there are others who share certain interests with them and will continue to share those interests into the foreseeable future. It is at this stage that a sense of solidarity develops, but this solidarity is still only on the basis of shared economic interests. There is no common worldview or anything of that nature. This kind of solidarity can lead to attempts to promote legal reform to improve the group’s position within the current system, but consciousness of how they, and others, might benefit through the creation of a new system is lacking.

It is only by passing through the third stage that hegemony really becomes possible. In this stage, the social group members becomes aware that their interests need to be extended beyond what they can do within the context of their own particular class. What is required is that their interests are taken up by other subordinate groups as their own. This was what Lenin and the Bolsheviks were thinking in forming an alliance with the peasants – that it was only through making the Bolshevik revolution also a peasants’ revolution, which peasants could see as being their own, that the urban proletariat could maintain its leading position.

Gramsci reckoned that in the historical context that he was working in, the passage of a social group from self-interested reformism to national hegemony could occur

most effectively via the political party. In this complex formulation, the different ideologies of allied groups come together. There will inevitably be conflict between these ideologies, and through a process of debate and struggle, one ideology, or a unified combination thereof, will emerge representing the allied classes. This ideology can be said to be hegemonic, the group that it represents has acquired a hegemonic position over the subordinate groups. At this stage, the party has reached maturity, having a unity of both economic and political goals as well as a moral and intellectual unity – one might say a shared worldview.

With this unity behind it, the party sets about transforming society in order to lay the conditions for the expansion of the hegemonic group. The state becomes the mechanism by which this is done: policies are enacted and enforced that allow the hegemonic group to more effectively achieve its goals and to create symmetry between its goals and those of other groups. Although these goals are formulated with the interests of a single group in mind, they need to be experienced by the populace as being in the interests of everybody. In order for this to be effective, the hegemonic group must have some form of engagement with the interests of the subordinate classes. The dominant interests cannot be simplistically imposed upon them.

Progressive hegemony

While Gramsci considers these pragmatic moves as being requirements for any group to come to power, he also has a very deep ethical concern for the way in which the process occurs. In this sense, we can detect in Gramsci's work a qualitative difference between the operations of hegemony by regressive, authoritarian groups on the one hand, and progressive social groups on the other. At an ethical level, Gramsci was above all else an anti-dogmatist believing that truth could not be imposed from the top down, but only made real through concrete and sympathetic dialogue with people. Where a regressive hegemony involves imposing a set of non-negotiable values upon the people, chiefly through use of coercion and deceit, a progressive hegemony will develop by way of democratically acquired consent in society. To give some flesh to these differences, the remainder of this article will elaborate on the different ways in which Gramsci talks about hegemonies of currently and previously ruling classes and how these contrast with the progressive hegemony that he hoped to see in the future.

It is evident that if we look through history, the capitalist class has retained its hegemony primarily through various forms of coercion, ranging from the direct deployment of the military through to more subtle forms, for example, using economic power to marginalise political opponents. It would, however, be a great mistake to think that capitalism does not also rely heavily upon building consent.

Indeed, it could be argued that it is capitalism's consent-building that we, from a strategic point of view, need to pay more attention to, as it is on this level that we compete with them. The nature and strength of this consent varies. There are ways in which capitalism succeeds in actively selling its vision to subordinate classes. This means not only selling the distorted vision of a society of liberty, freedom, innovation, etc., but also deploying the ideas of bourgeois economics to convince working people, for example, that although capitalist policy is in the ultimate interests of the capitalist class, they too gain some of the benefits via trickle-down effects. Capitalism can also win consent among those who perhaps don't buy the idea that the system is in their interests, but who have been convinced that there is no alternative or that the alternatives would be worse – in other words, through the promotion of the belief that the system is a *necessary evil*.

The 20th century saw capitalism massively expand this form of consensus, largely through the corporate control of the media and advertising. In the United States in particular, the promotion of the "American dream", and all of the useless commodities required to attain it, served not only to massively boost consumption and thereby the economic interests of the capitalists, it also sold a way of life which only capitalism could deliver. This was of course aided throughout the Cold War with simultaneous attempts to smear any alternative to capitalism as slavery. The capitalist class, in opposing any policy attempts to close in on corporately owned media, used its hegemonic political power to create the conditions for the building of further consent, in turn expanding their interests. The hegemonic group will continually struggle in this fashion to reach greater levels of consent – in this case by locking people into rigid mindsets and overcoming any optimism. We can look at former Australian Prime Minister John Howard's attempts to expand privately owned schools, and to change high school history syllabi to make them more favourable to bourgeois perspectives as a part of this ongoing hegemonic process. The ruling class will constantly try to expand its field of interests and win further consent in response to changes in context and challenges to legitimacy.

'Syndicalism'

Certain forms of trade unionism can also be seen as examples of capitalist hegemony. What Gramsci calls "syndicalism" -- the view that the conditions of the workers can be maximally uplifted via the increasing power of the trade unions -- reflects a social group (the workers) left in the economic-corporate stage of development due to the hegemonic influence of capitalists, specifically free trade advocates, in the realm of ideology. The free trade advocates argue that the state and civil society should be kept separate, that the state should keep out of the economic sphere, which functions autonomously – leave it to the "invisible hand of the market" and so on. The syndicalists had adopted this assumption of an arbitrary

separation of the social and economic realms on the one hand and the political realm on the other, and assume that they could bring about radical change without political representation. The concrete result of this is that they are left to negotiate for narrowly defined improvements in the economic sphere, with no policy changes that would allow these wins to take on a more permanent basis. Meanwhile, the free trade advocates are themselves actively involved in policy, despite their claims, setting up conditions that will be favourable to the capitalist class!

When the interests of the capitalist class are directly threatened, however, the hegemonic forces will inevitably resort to coercion. There is no room to negotiate on this, within the current hegemonic order. On a simple level this can mean legislating to allow police to crack down on workers taking industrial action, who threaten profits in an immediate sense. But a far bigger threat to the capitalists is the development of a hegemonic alternative within civil society. The threat is that people will move from the economic-corporate phase, and recognise that their interests overlap with all of those whom capitalism marginalises and holds back, that they will come to recognise their power and demand radical change.

This being the greatest threat to capital, the most effective way for it to use coercion is to break apart emerging progressive alliances between subordinate groups. When confronted with force and economic bullying, the people are less able to relate to the group. Concerns for survival mean that people have to defend their own interests as individuals. The movement of the progressive hegemony is slowed, as people are forced to behave in a corporatist manner. The ruling class can also try to violently break apart movements by stirring up ideological differences, appealing to religion, for example.

Democracy and consensus

Gramsci saw the development of a progressive hegemony involving a far greater degree of openness, democracy and consensus, rather than coercion. In so far as there is coercion, it should only exist to hold back those reactionary forces that would thwart society's development. This would allow the masses the space in which to reach their potential. A large part of The Prison Notebooks is devoted to figuring out what would be required for this kind of hegemony to develop, and a lot of Gramscian thinkers since have devoted themselves to this puzzle.

As a starting point, we can say that while the existing hegemony tries to keep all the disaffected and subordinate social groups divided, the emergent progressive hegemony must bring them together. Gramsci certainly recognised the challenge involved in this. In his own historical situation (and as is undoubtedly still the case in ours), there were considerable barriers between the marginalised groups in terms

of experiences, language and worldview. What all of these groups had in common, however, was that none of them had adequate political representation within the current system. Gramsci calls these groups that lack political representation “subaltern”. The challenge of the hegemonic group is to provide a critique of the system such that subaltern groups are made aware of their commonality and then “raised up” into the political life of the party. In order to facilitate this incorporation of others, Gramsci stressed the need for the hegemonic group to move beyond its economic-corporatist understanding of its own interests, sacrificing some of its immediate economic goals in the interest of deeper moral and intellectual unity. It would need to overcome its traditional prejudices and dogmas and take on a broader view if was to lead while maintaining trust and consensus (both necessary to overcome existing power).

If these aligned forces are to have any historical significance, they need to be enduring and organically related to conditions on the ground, not merely a temporary convergence. To develop mass momentum they would need to demonstrate, both in people’s imagination and in action, that they were capable of coming to power and achieving the tasks they had set for themselves. These tasks must effectively be everyone’s tasks – they must come to represent every aspiration, and be the fulfilment of the failed movements of the previous generations.

Such a demonstration of power and historical significance could not be achieved through a passive action, of which Gramsci provides the example of the general strike. If the movement simply represents the rejection of the existing system or non-participation in it, then it would quickly fragment into everyone’s unique ideas of what should replace the system precisely at the moment when unity is most called for. It must be an active embodiment of the collective will, crystallised in a constructive and concrete agenda for change.

Clearly this is no small ask, and Gramsci is certainly not of the view that one can just implement these strategies as though reading from a manual. What is called for is for rigorous work on the ground laying the moral and intellectual terrain upon which these historical developments can occur. One develops the unity, self-awareness and maturity of the movement, making it a powerful and cohesive force, and then patiently, with careful attention to the contextual conditions, waits for the opportune moment for this force to be exerted.

Moment of crisis

This moment is the moment of crisis within the existing, dominant hegemony: the moment at which it becomes clear to the populace that the ruling class can no

longer solve the most pressing issues of humanity. Provided that the progressive forces adequately assert the alternative at this moment and the ruling group is unable to rapidly rebuild consent, it becomes visible that the conditions under which the ruling group became hegemonic are now passing away and society can collectively say “*We don’t need you anymore.*”. Gramsci calls this process of historical purging “catharsis” in which “structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives.” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 367.)

For Gramsci the need for this transition from the world as it is to the freedom to create the world anew should be the starting point for all Marxist strategy.

So, what does Gramsci have to offer us? His insistence that the socialist political form should be one of openness, democracy and the building of consensus certainly provides us with greater vision and focus and really ought to inform the activities of all progressive political groups – if not for ethical reasons, then at least because in the present environment, without a willingness to genuinely work on building consensus with others, one’s chances of success are very much diminished. (We’re not the ruling class – we don’t have the means to coerce). More than this, however, Gramsci provides us with a way of thinking; he gives us the conceptual tools to dissect the political situation we find ourselves in, to view it in historical context and to understand where we can find the conditions for the further development of our power.

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